

OPINION

Loss of labor, delivery service at hospital has ripple effect

In rural America, some women have given birth on the side of the road because of the time it takes to drive to the nearest hospital with labor and delivery services. Spruce Pine has its own hospital, but just as many rural hospitals have, Blue Ridge Regional will likely no longer offer obstetrical services in the future.

Doing away with labor and delivery is a trend across North Carolina and the nation. A paltry 6 percent of the nation's ob-gyns work in rural areas, according to a survey by the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, yet 15 percent of the country's population, or 46 million people, live in rural America. As a result, fewer than half of rural women live within a 30-minute drive of the nearest hospital offering obstetric services. About 88 percent of women in rural towns live within a 60-minute drive, and in the most isolated areas that number is 79 percent.

Maternal mortality is significantly higher in rural areas and with disappearing labor and delivery services that number can only increase. Scientific American analyzed public mortality data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and found that in 2015, the maternal mortality rate in large central metropolitan areas was 18.2 per 100,000 live births, compared to rural areas where that number was 29.4.

Family physicians are not moving in to fill the care gaps and the number of family physicians offering obstetrical services has dropped by half in recent years as well.

Rural health care in general has taken a hit in the past few decades as hospitals have closed and fewer doctors have sought to practice in rural areas. Obstetrics-gynecology care is particularly vulnerable because delivering a baby is expensive, accounting for more than 5 percent of hospital costs.

The reason or reasons behind Mission's decision to consider moving Blue Ridge Regional Hospital's labor and delivery services to McDowell Hospital in Marion notwithstanding, it is a move with a negative impact on not only our area's healthcare, but our economy and quality of life in general.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deyton Color Run a success

To the editor:

The faculty and staff of Deyton Elementary School would like to express its sincere thanks to everyone who helped with organizing and planning as well as all who participated May 19 in our school's color run.

We would also like to thank all individuals and businesses who donated items for the Color Run raffle and concessions. Your generosity and support resulted in an overwhelmingly successful event for our school.

**Brandon Birchfield, principal
Deyton Elementary**

Friend remembers Bob Broadwater

To the editor:

Bob Broadwater Sr., a friend to so many Mitchell County residents, died May 10, 2017, but not without the thoughts and prayers of so many of his friends and family.

Bob believed he was here to help others, and he did in so many ways. He never thought there was a job he could not do, and many times he would do a job for someone without pay, because he knew they needed it done and did not have the money to do it.

He was an incredible artist with rock and wood, and has left reminders of his creative skills throughout the county. He fiercely loved his family and friends and would have done anything for them.

He also was a board member of the Mitchell County Historical Society, because he believed children and grandchildren needed to understand their heritage and the importance of it. He also was a volunteer with the Mitchell-Yancey UMC Food Pantry, where he spent many hours helping ensure families had a turkey for the holidays and enough food to get through the week.

He also had a select group of boys he looked out for and he considered his "boys."

Bob will long be remembered and missed tremendously by so many.

**Susan F. Basini
Bakersville**

An open letter to Sen. Ralph Hise

Sen. Hise:

Why would you introduce legislation that would take away food from currently 133,000 enrollees in the North Carolina food stamp program, of which 55,000 of these are children?

I'm sure our North Carolina Senators know where their next meals are coming from. Is it beneficial to the state to have children's stomachs growling because they are hungry? We already have 1-in-6 children in our state facing food insecurity. The bill you propose will only make matters worse.

Please don't represent me in this manner.

**Claire Wygand
Spruce Pine**

Decision could unravel gains

To the editor:

Caring deeply for Mitchell and Yancey counties, my wife, Susan, and I are concerned about a decision soon to be made by Memorial Mission Hospital whether to retain labor and delivery services at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital. We understand costs are high, deliveries and reimbursements are low and physician coverage is challenging.

If we take away the one service growing families must depend on, however, which is access to healthcare professionals who will see mothers through prenatal care and be responsible for delivering their children, we risk unraveling the gains made since our hospital was founded in 1955. And going down a treacherous mountain road to an unfamiliar hospital while in labor is a recipe for disaster for the child and the mother.

We need to speak for our local community that we cherish every baby born at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital. They are the workers, the schoolchildren, the voters that will keep Mitchell and Yancey counties alive and ensure the future.

From the medical point of view, each time a service is deleted from a rural hospital, the hospital is minimized. But when obstetrical care is available, radiology and laboratory services are enhanced, nursing staff is

enhanced, the building is better utilized, local employment at the hospital is increased and the community benefits.

We hope the trustees of the Blue Ridge Regional Hospital will make the case to Memorial Mission Hospital that labor and delivery services should remain a vital part of what is offered at our regional hospital.

**David Larson, M.D.
Spruce Pine**

Ending labor, delivery services a terrible idea

To the editor:

The Mission Hospital Board and administration are considering stopping obstetrical services at the Blue Ridge Regional Hospital in Spruce Pine. This would be a terrible loss to our community.

I speak about this as a father and grandfather of children who would have died or been damaged if we hadn't had the wonderful obstetrical care in Spruce Pine. Two of my children, who are now grown, living here and serving in our medical community, were twins with overlapping and interlocking chins. One was head down, and one was head up with a foot coming out first. They required an emergency C-section or one would have almost certainly died.

Three years ago, my daughter was near term with our grandson and was being checked at the hospital when she developed a massive hemorrhage. Within 10 minutes, an emergency C-section was performed. She and Jack were saved. She never could have survived transport to Asheville or Marion.

There are many stories like ours. The change will bring an almost certain increase in infant or maternal deaths and morbidity. Pregnant women with false labor and minor complications will be forced to make trips up and down the mountain to be checked.

I also speak as a physician who has served in our community for more than 40 years – both in family practice with hospital care and in the emergency department at Blue Ridge. I know how difficult and dangerous it is to transport pregnant mothers who are bleeding or losing their babies. I know how frightening it is to deliver a baby in the emergency room where none of us – doctors and nurses – have been trained or are experienced in obstetrics.

The loss of this critical service would mean there would be no obstetrical care for women and babies between Boone and Asheville. The number of deliveries in Spruce Pine have been on an increasing trend over the past year. If this department closes, the physicians, midwives and nurses who have chosen this profession will move out of our community. Already, at least one family doctor who wanted to do OB decided against coming here to live and practice because of this controversy.

We will lose family practice and women's health services if the obstetrics department is closed. This is a significant health care, economic and employment loss to our community. My observation has been that in rural hospitals that take this step, surgical and medical services begin to shrink.

Obstetrical services and women's health services bring young families to health care. We have a wonderful, recently built facility and a competent caring staff in this department. With advertising and nurturing these services would grow and flourish. Perhaps that is where the decision should be – on how best to promote the obstetrical and women's services at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital.

**Jerry Cade, M.D.
Burnsville**

CALL OR WRITE

To voice your opinion about ending labor and delivery services at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital, call BRRH CEO Rebecca Carter at 828-766-1804, BRRH CEO Ron Paulus at 828-213-1111, or write to BRRH Board of Trustees chair Martha Tyner c/o Becky Carter, Blue Ridge Regional Hospital, 125 Hospital Drive, Spruce Pine, NC 28777; Dr. Ron Paulus, Memorial Mission Hospital, 509 Biltmore Ave., Asheville, NC 28801; or Save Labor and Delivery, P.O. Box 5, Burnsville, NC 28714.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Mitchell News-Journal welcomes letters to the editor on issues of local importance. Deadline to submit a letter for publication in the coming week's edition is 5 p.m. Friday. All writers are expected to follow the our letters policy:

- Letters must be exclusive to the News-Journal;
- Letters must include the writer's full name, street address and daytime telephone number for verification. The writer's name and city of residence will be published – names cannot be withheld;
- Letters must be original – no photocopies;
- Letters should be 500 words or fewer;
- We do not publish poems, excerpts from other publication or lengthy submissions of scripture; or letters signed by groups or multiple individuals;
- Letters endorsing or criticizing a business will not be published;
- We reserve the right to edit letters for brevity, style and libel. Publication of any letter is the sole discretion of the Mitchell News-Journal.

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